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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 000536

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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA AND NEA/IPA
PARIS ALSO FOR USMISSION UNESCO

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [KWBG](#) [PINR](#) [JO](#) [IS](#)
SUBJECT: JORDANIAN CONCERNS ON THE OLD CITY'S MUGHRABI GATE

REF: AMMAN 394

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Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Jordan is actively engaged in discussions with Israeli and UNESCO officials about plans to replace the access ramp leading up to the Mughrabi Gate to the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem, but remains concerned that Israel will disregard archeological finds of significance to Muslims and will upset the status quo of Jordan's special role regarding Jerusalem's holy sites. Poloffs met on two occasions in mid-February with the Foreign Ministry's point-man on the issue, Omar Nahar, who is Director of Policy Planning and Research. Our meetings took place before and after Nahar met with the Ra'if Nijm, who leads the Jordanian technical team that meets with Israel and UNESCO.

Good Faith Not Exhausted, But Jordan Feels Stymied

¶2. (C) Nahar recited Jordan's historical role and responsibility for the holy sites, and explained the Jordanian concern that Israel will exploit the new project to clean out rubble and expand the area of the Western Wall plaza. This, he claimed, would endanger the area's Islamic character. "Even dirt is considered Islamic waqf," he said. Specifically, Nahar worried that Israel would use for its own purposes the existing Islamic structures whose archeological remains were uncovered by excavations, and would pursue efforts to "prove" that the Temple Mount existed. "We think there will be a lot of trouble if Israel goes ahead with this," he said. Note. In a February 5 meeting with NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch (reftel), Foreign Minister Salaheddin al-Bashir characterized the Mughrabi Gate matter as a "bomb that will soon explode." End note.

¶3. (C) Talks are still at the technical stage, Nahar said, and while Jordan has not yet approached the Israelis on the political level, this might be necessary in the future as Jordan strives to maintain the status quo. Still, he held out hope that the issue would be resolved at the technical level. At our first meeting, Nahar noted that "we have very good working relationships with the Israelis. When I say I am hopeful, I truly am." He added that even if various Israeli governmental bodies continue to approve action, this would not be the same thing as actually implementing those plans. "To announce a plan is one thing, to go ahead is something else." Jordan on January 13 submitted its own general ramp concept to UNESCO designed to maintain the character of the area while replacing the wooden bridge with a more modern structure. "We have asked UNESCO to be a judge."

¶4. (C) Though not abandoning hope that the matter could be resolved, Nahar struck a less optimistic tone at our second meeting, which took place a few days after he received an update from Jordanian technical team leader Nijm. Summarizing the latest developments, Nahar said that while Israel possesses all the topographical and archeological data relevant to the project, it has not shared it all with the Jordanian technical experts. Lacking enough data to provide its own sufficiently detailed counterproposal, Jordan has asked and will continue to ask the Israeli authorities for direct access to the site - something Israel has to-date rejected. Nahar said it was already too late to respond positively to UNESCO's request for a more detailed Jordanian ramp proposal in advance of the next technical meeting on February 24.

Jordan Won't Rubber Stamp Israeli Plan

¶5. (C) According to Nahar, Jordan would strongly prefer to take control of planning and implementing the project. He assessed Israel's keenness on involving Jordan as primarily aimed at getting the Kingdom's stamp of approval on whatever plan Israel implements, but Jordan is wary of this approach: "We want to do the work, not just approve it, and we would like to pay for it." Nahar said Jordan fears being implicated as one of the "guilty parties" if the project proceeds in controversy, which he said could lead to potentially violent protests among Palestinians, Jordanians, and around the Arab world (Nahar quickly injected his belief that Jordan could keep a handle on any such development inside the country). Despite these concerns, Nahar insisted that Jordan will continue to play a constructive and flexible role, and remain open to new ideas for modifying existing plans or even the basic concept of how to provide access to the Mughrabi Gate.

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Biographical Note

¶6. (C) Nahar is new to his present post; and the post itself is a new one at the Foreign Ministry. He currently has a staff of one, and said he is wary of seeking to expand his office before he determines the full extent of his role as Director of Policy Planning and Research. For now, he describes himself as a "hired gun" for the Foreign Minister, dealing with issues on an ad hoc basis with the goal of "invigorating new thinking" on policy. Nahar has expressed an interest in learning about "best practices" for similar positions in other foreign ministries, including the State Department. Before taking up his present position, Nahar served as Director of the Political Department at the Office of the Prime Minister. Prior to that, he was Director of the Office of the Minister of the Royal Hashemite Court for two years (but was swept out along with his boss, Samir Rifai, in a 2005 shakeup of the King's team). As a career diplomat, Nahar served at the Jordanian Embassy in London (2000-2004), headed up the MFA's Israel Desk (1999-2000), and was one of the two Jordanian diplomats to open the Embassy in Tel Aviv, where he stayed until 1999. Nahar attended the University of Jordan (1986-1990) where he received a BSc in Political Science and Business. He is a heavy cigar smoker who used to smoke cigarettes. He speaks English well, but occasionally fumbles for a technical term. Nahar and his wife, Hiba, have two children. End note.

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